THE BROOKLYN RAIL

INCONVERSATION

Mel Bochner with Phong Bui

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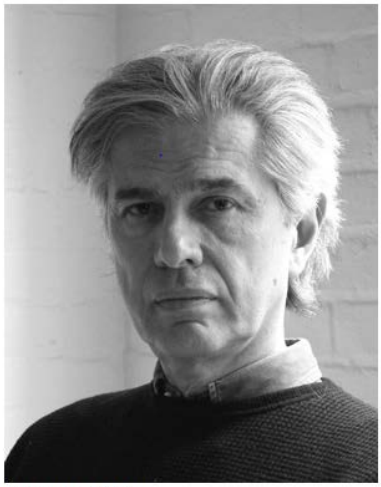

Photo: Nicholas Knight

While preparing three forthcoming exhibits, *Drawing form Four Decades* at Wynn Kramasky Gallery (April 25 to June 24),* *Thesauras Paintings* at Peter Freeman Inc. (April 25 to July 1) and "*Focus: Mel Bochner*" at The Art Institute of Chicago (October 5, 2006 to January 7, 2007—an overview of the artist's language—based works created from 1966 to 2006, curated by James Rondeau), Mel Bochner took time to sit down with Rail Publisher Phong Bui to talk about his life and work.

Phong Bui (Rail): Could we begin with your upbringing and your eventual experience in art school?

Bochner: I was born in Pittsburgh and raised in a traditional Jewish home. My father was a sign painter, which had a great deal to do with my early interest in painting. I graduated from Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in 1962. It was an interesting period when the art school was in transition from the old Beaux Arts system to a more Bauhaus kind of model. In the morning you had an Albers design course—color theory, collage studies of geometric shapes and so on; in the afternoon you drew from plaster casts with charcoal, estompe and a chamois cloth. Two vastly different concepts of what an artist's education should be. As you can imagine, the teachers were quite antagonistic to one another and the students were caught in the middle—between the modernist design teacher, Douglas Wilson, and the academic drawing teacher, Wilfred Readio. Readio was a great master of the Socratic method. He only asked questions, he never gave answers. If you couldn't answer the question, he would patiently reframe it, again and again and again, until you eventually understood where he was going. Only then would he very gently say, "I knew you knew the answer." He believed that the answer was nothing, the question everything. Of course, to an eighteen year old that was hard medicine to swallow.

Rail: Did the two experiences in your training coincide with your study of philosophy? And more importantly, what kind of painting were you making during that time?

Bochner: I think, in some way, my work has always been about figuring out how to reconcile those two contradictory ideas of being an artist. At any rate, when I graduated I learned very quickly that art school didn't prepare you for earning a living. I went out to San Francisco for a while, then traveled around Mexico—my "beatnik period." It was a difficult moment because all the jobs I had were hand-to-mouth, plus I was very unhappy with my work, sort of a mishmash of de Kooning and Gorky. In San Francisco I fell under the influence of Clyfford Still and Dubuffet, and my paintings, out of sheer frustration, became increasingly monochromatic and heavily textured. I couldn't find my way out of the labyrinth of late abstract expressionism, and began doubting whether I should even be an artist. At that point, a childhood friend who was writing his PhD on Heidegger at Northwestern University, invited me to Chicago to stay with him and audit classes. Northwestern was a very exciting place at that time because a few years earlier the entire Continental philosophy department from Harvard, which had shifted over to linguistic philosophy, migrated to Northwestern. A lot of work was being done there on translating Merleau-Ponty. But it didn't take me very long to realize that I didn't have the monastic temperament to spend all my time in the library reading philosophy and writing papers. So I started skipping classes and going to the Art Institute of Chicago to look at paintings. The desire to make things, to get back inside the process, became too powerful to ignore. And, if I was really going to commit to being an artist, I had to go to New York.

Rail: You came to New York around 1964, and two years later you began teaching at the School of Visual Arts. Teaching seems like an activity that you have a serious and consistent commitment to, while also maintaining your productive career as an artist. How did that come about?

Bochner: My first job in New York was as a guard at the Jewish Museum. In those days a lot of artists, Dan Flavin, Robert Ryman, and Brice Marden, among others, had jobs as museum guards. One day Dore Ashton, who was then the dean of Humanities at The School of Visual Arts, came in to see the Phillip Guston show. We struck up a conversation and she suggested that I apply to Silas Rhodes, the school's founder-director, for a teaching job. Dore's idea was to hire artists, rather than academics, to teach art history to young artists. So she was instrumental in my teaching art history rather than studio, which was very important because it forced me to think about how visual ideas can be discussed—the relationship between language and images. When you are standing in front of a class showing slides of paintings that is exactly what you are engaged in: thinking through how images convey ideas.

Rail: One of Wittgenstein's aphorisms, "What we can say at all can be said clearly. What we cannot talk about should be passed over in silence," became a popular slogan of the minimalist era. Did that kind of thinking lead you to write your long article "Excerpts From Speculation" published in Art Forum in 1970? Isn't it partly because you repudiated any kind of inscribed label to your work? You raised a very important question concerning the confusion between idealism and intention. And you very decisively stated that "works of art are not illustration of ideas".

Bochner: One of the conversations going on in New York in the late '60s was about the relationship of the object to the art experience. There had been a lot of talk after the emergence of Rauschenberg, Johns, Stella, and later Judd, about art and objecthood. Their work was an attempt to move away from the romantic, abstract expressionist notion of the artwork as a doorway to transcendental experience, and bring it back to the reality of everyday experience. Consequently, younger artists, like myself, who were trying to get out from under the weight of Johns and the others, were talking about what it would mean to eliminate the object altogether. My feeling was that there were ways of extending, or re-inventing visual experience, but that it was very important that it remain visual. The viewer should enter the idea through a visual or phenomenological experience rather than simply reading it. That was the debate which led me to write "Language is Not Transparent" on the wall of the Dwan gallery in 1970. Surprisingly, the rhetoric of conceptualism wasn't that different from the rhetoric of abstract expressionism. To claim that language offers a direct connection to the artist's ideas is not different in kind from the claim that a brush stroke, or a drip, offers a direct connection to the artist's emotions. By the way, did you ever notice, as someone once pointed out, that no matter how big or small the painting, all drips are the same size?

Rail: (Laughs) It's true.

Bochner: The invasion of language into the visual field led to a whole series of other, often unacknowledged, questions, such as, who is the assumed speaker? Or who is the assumed audience? We know that all abuses of power begin with the abuse of language. The issue I was trying to get at in writing "Excerpts From Speculation," and that I'm still trying to get at in my recent "Thesaurus" paintings, is what ideologies are hidden in everyday language?

Rail: Your 1966 Christmas show at SVA, "Working Drawings And Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art" has come to be regarded as a touchstone of the conceptual art movement. Basically you were asked to put up a show and you initially wanted to invite your artist friends to lend their "working drawings," but there was no money available to frame them

so instead you made Xerox copies and put them in four black binders and placed them on four pedestals. Do you sometimes think that kind of situation is coincidental partly because you were able to think quickly on your feet? Or would you regard the experience of having created the show and having been taken seriously as prompting you to be more of a thinker about the way you perceive your action?

Bochner: A couple of years ago a Japanese critic approached me and said, "After thinking a great deal about your work I have arrived at one, and only one, question I want to ask you: what would have been the rest of your life if the woman at the School of Visual Arts had had the money to frame all of the working drawings you collected?" _ Talk about _the Zen question!

But you have to understand that there was a context around my ability "to react quickly on my feet." I was already using photography in my work, already thinking about mechanical means of reproduction. The solution began to evolve at the moment the Xerox copies began to come off the machine. Suddenly all those differently sized drawings were the same size, the same shape, and neatly stacked up in a block. The machine made the book. All I had to do was recognize it. But then, of course, came the difficult decisions. How and under what specific conditions should the books be presented? Working my way through all of the implications of those questions, which were unique to this situation, made it possible to come up with a work that otherwise could not have been anticipated.

Rail: When did you become seriously engaged with photography?

Bochner: In late 1966, a group show called "Scale Models and Drawings" was being organized at the Dwan gallery, the leading gallery of minimalism. Sol LeWitt recommended to Virginia Dwan that she visit my studio to see what I was doing. I was working on a piece made out of little wooden cubes that were rearranged daily according to a numerical system. Virginia wanted to show one of the configurations, but I was hesitant because no single arrangement conveyed the fact that it wasn't a fixed object, it was an object in daily flux. Virginia said, "Well, we could have the receptionist change it everyday." I said, "That still doesn't work because the viewer on Wednesday will have no way of knowing what it's going to look like on Thursday." She said, "Well, look, that's your problem, if you can figure it out you can be in the show." Which I thought was fair enough. What immediately came to my mind was, why not take photographs of all the different changes, all the serial permutations of the structure, and show the photographs instead of the object? Which is what I did. So for me, photography began as a tool to record the narrative of a process.

Rail: Well, along with Bruce Nauman, you're probably the earliest proponent of making photo documentation work where the artist is not so much creating the sculpture, but creating a two dimensional work about sculpture.

Bochner: The key word is about. The shift was away from a direct experience to one mediated by photography.

Rail: Tell us a little bit about of your collaboration with Robert Smithson for the article on the Hayden Planetarium, "The Domain of the Great Bear," published in Art Voices 5, in 1966.

Bochner: Smithson and I would meet every so often and have lunch at this little dive on 81st street across from the Museum of Natural History and the Planetarium. We were talking one day about how difficult it was to get dealers into your studio and how all they ever said was "Send me some slides." The question occurred to us, "Why make original works of art if all anyone is interested in is seeing slides!" Why not just make slides! This was at a time when Marshall McLuhan and his idea about media were being widely discussed. Another big influence on both of us was the writings of Jorge Luis Borges. Anyway, we started thinking, could there be an artwork that was a reproduction, but where there was no original? What if the work of art took the form of an article in an art magazine? In other words, turn a secondary source into a primary one. These were pretty subversive notions at the time. Since we were both publishing art criticism we already had access to magazine editors. We knew, however, that we couldn't present it to the editor as artwork. What we needed was an ostensive subject. As we were having this conversation we were looking at the Hayden Planetarium across the street—which suddenly seemed like the perfect camoflouged subject.. The editor, Sam Edwards, who wasn't terribly interested in art—he was a kind of young "old lefty"—went for the idea, and agreed to our other stipulation that we had to do the layout. Our motivation was to enter our ideas directly into the stream without having to wait for the approval of dealers or critics or curators. But our real intention was to plant a time bomb inside the art system.

Rail: The last time we saw each other, you reminisced about Meyer's Schapiro's lecture at MoMA, "Cézanne and the Philosophers," that was in conjunction with a show of Cézanne's late paintings that William Rubin organized in 1977. We spoke briefly about the founder of the Scottish school of common sense philosophy, Thomas Reid. In his book, "An Inquiry into the Human Mind on Principles of Common Sense," he brought up an extraordinary example of a blind professor, Dr. Saunderson, who was famous for solving mathematical equations through the construction of geometrical patterns with wooden strips. What is interesting about that is that his blindness forced

him to work with his other senses, and presupposes the concept of space -which is exactly identical to that of a seeing mind. This of course can be applied to Helen Keller, Borges and other blind individuals as well. What Dr. Saunderson said was between geometric properties on the plane surface and the three dimensional, measurable properties of the seen object and held object, there was a definite set of transformation which has to do with the ability to organize action and behavior in the world by relating from the way things look and the way things are. In your case the seeing mind seems to be in constant negotiation with spatial problems by means of measurement. And you do it in a variety of ways, whether from early on, measuring actual things in your lab at the Singer Project, works that were made in your studio on many occasions, then the show at Heiner Freidrich gallery, which consequently led to series of counting, studies of intervals, or what you referred to them as, the "7 Properties of Between." I am curious how much, if you look at the whole evolution, of the relationship between your seeing mind, which produces the visual language, and the visceral or playful process is being mitigated?

Bochner: My way of doing things is to follow my interests wherever they lead me. I don't have a pre-formed theory about what my work is or should be. I work by making up hypotheses, "What would happen if…" and then working through the contradictions as they come up. It's an inductive process and it has led me up some blind alleys, but that's what makes being an artist interesting. That's where the adventure is, in the not-knowing.

Rail: I have read essays that have been written about your work which seem to give more weight to the conceptual process, or be based on an a priori approach, including mathematical models, theories of seriality and linguistic structures, rather than the manual process of art making. What is your opinion on the highly theoretical response to your work?

Bochner: I know that my work has an assertive look. But that's not necessarily what its origins are. From the inside, from my own experience of it, it's a question of making it up as I go along. But I am a great believer in not trying to determine how it's interpreted, because I think, in a Bloomian sense, that a work of art lives by being continuously misinterpreted. When it runs out of ways of being misinterpreted, when everything has been squeezed out of it, then it ceases to be useful and becomes history. In some of the early work that you were talking about, like the measurement pieces, the counting pieces, I was thinking about the relationship between language and space. At present I am thinking about the relationship between language and color. How color can relieve a text of its duty to meaning. At the root of all my work is the recognition that we tend to take most of our experience for granted.

Rail: In your dialectical process of spatial interest and measurement, there seems to be two paralleled investigations, one being a diagrammatic nearly Pythagorean kind, and the other post-cubist structure including all the uses of orthogonal lines and irregularly shaped canvas as seen in your painterly paintings from the '80s. One is light-handed and the other is heavy-handed. How do you negotiate between the two?

Bochner: I've told this story a number of times, but maybe it's relevant here…One day on the street, Smithson and I ran into Ad Reinhardt, whom we both respected immensely. At a certain point he said, "Some day every artist has to choose between Malevich and Duchamp." Smithson and I just looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. The point being "Why choose?" What appeared to Reinhardt, who developed in the 1930s, as an enormous difference between Duchamp and Malevich, by the mid-1960s, did not seem like such a big difference. Anyway I didn't feel that I had to make those kind of choices then and I don't feel like I have to make them now. Those painterly paintings I did in the 1980s are structurally very rigorous. There were preset boundaries in terms of where the lines could go and what they could do. But there were no preset boundaries in terms of what the color or paint could do. That was the contradiction I wanted to explore. I realized that I was walking on the edge of an abyss. I knew how easily they could be misunderstood, and they were. But that was not my problem. I had an idea and I owed it to the idea to see where it could take me.

Rail: We were talking about blindness before, and you once based a work on a Borges quote, "There is a labyrinth which is a straight line." There's a great story that the poet, Alaistair Reid, who knew Borges and had translated his work into English, told me: Borges, every day after work at the Biblioteca Nacional in Buenos Aires, would walk down the stairs onto the street corner, he then extends his arms in the hopes that someone would come and take him across the street to get him a taxi. By that time, he was so famous like a national treasure that every time he does this, there'll always be someone who recognizes him and carries on this routine. Sure enough, on this particular occasion, a man came to his rescue. He took Borges' arms, walked him across the street, and got him a taxi. On which point, Borges said to this man, "Thank you, Sir, for taking me across the street" And the man said in return, "No, Thank you, Sir." The man turned out to be blind as well.

Bochner: [Laughs.] I'll tell you my Borges story. Dore invited him to give a talk at the School of Visual Arts in 1966, or '67, and every hip artist in New York was in the audience. Everyone was expecting to hear him talk about his own work, but instead, he delivered a talk on an obscure topic in Old Norse literature. It was so erudite that no one there had a clue what he was talking about. It was clearly

deliberate on his part and a great piece of Surrealist theater. Anyway, there was a reception for him afterwards to which I was invited. As I was sitting in the living room he sat down on the sofa right next to me. I thought, here I am sitting next to Borges, this is probably the only chance I'll ever have to meet him, I have to try to engage him in a conversation. Across the room from us was sitting a man who looked exactly like Claude Rains, the old English actor. Desperate to think of something, anything, to say, I turned to Borges and said, "That man over there looks very much like Claude Rains." Borges replied disinterestedly, "Oh, really." I forged ahead anyway, "It's interesting because Claude Rains became a famous movie actor without ever having been seen, because the first movie he starred in was H.G. Wells's The Invisible Man." To which Borges responded, "Hmm." But I was in too deep to turn around, so I continued, "Well, I know how much you admire H.G. Wells." "No, I don't," he replied. Confused by his response, I said, "But I've read your writings on Wells, and I remember how much you admired Wells' great short story "In the Valley of the Blind, the One-Eyed man is King." To which he replied, "Wells was a failure." Totally baffled, I asked, "Why?" "For one example," he said, "in the novel The Time Machine, the time machine is such a clumsy metaphor. It would have been so much more elegant if it had been a magic ring. If he had rubbed a magic ring and been transported through time." "But," I answered, "a magic ring doesn't make any sense in the context of a parable about the politics of technology." "Oh no, a magic ring would have been much better," Borges said, and with that he stood up and walked away.

Rail: So he got annoyed.

Bochner: I have no idea what it was about, because early on he had written so brilliantly, and so positively, about Wells. But the mystery, and what I still don't understand to this day, was how he was able to just stand up and walk away, because, as you know, he was totally blind.